

A CUT ABOVE

William Henry Handcrafts Knives, Cutlery...and Pens

BY RHONDA J. FOSTER

When Matt Conable dropped out of college to work at a knife shop at age 19, he thought it was just a stop on the road. He has been making knives ever since.

"At the time, I just didn't want to be in college anymore, and this was the antithesis of college because it was 100 percent tangible. You could see what you did every day," says Conable of his early years as a knife maker. He was intrigued by the combination of art and

utility, the interplay of form and function. "They were beautiful things, and they could work. And the knives could work better than what you thought possible, without compromising the value."

Michael Henry Honack, the other principal of the William Henry duo, is a knife collector. He got Conable's resume through an acquaintance and then met with him as he was getting ready to go to graduate school and reinvent himself with an MBA. The two developed a business plan together, and Honack capitalized the startup. They wanted the company to have its own identity, so the name became a combination of their middle names: "I'm William, he's Henry," says Conable. "William Henry sounds like one of the founding fathers...it's a name that speaks to history," he continues. "In fact, there's a long

tradition of cutlery as an iconic aspect of American culture, going back to the Jim Bowie blade at the Alamo, Daniel Boone, and all this frontiersman stuff. Tying into that with a name made good sense." It took another six months to come up with the logo, a cross between a cattle brand and a monogram: "That's exactly who we are—a mix of aristocracy and refinement and tough frontier."

Conable's philosophy has never wavered in the eleven years since the company's founding. "A tool that's crafted by hand and works superlatively is really art in and of itself. A tool that came off a big machine can be very good, but it doesn't have any warmth—there's no soul to it," Conable says. "What continues to intrigue me is that you can dually develop an improved tool and measure increasingly high levels of performance, and

The pens are embellished with a gemstone set into the clip.



PENS PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEOFFREY DEAN



“I didn’t want to make another cigar-shaped pen. I wanted something that stood out on its own.”

you can also figure out how to make it beautiful so that it stands equally in a museum or out in the field...” he shares. Today, William Henry produces knives, cutlery and pens, its newest innovation.

The company has a very long list of high-profile customers, including Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Bill Murray, Andy Garcia, Pierce Brosnan, Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top, Will Smith and Nicholas Cage. The company’s cutlery is used by a number of famous chefs, including John Besh of Restaurant August in New Orleans and Dante Boccuzzi, executive chef at Aureole, New York. The website features an instructional video with an unscripted introduction by actor and author Peter Coyote—another loyal and famous customer. Conable conceived this video to educate people about what it takes to build their products and to convey the intrinsic value of this unique product.

“My choice has always been to never play games,” says Conable. “I tell people exactly how we do what we do, and I ask them to simply evaluate the value... I knew what I wanted to make when I started the business. I had a ‘picture’

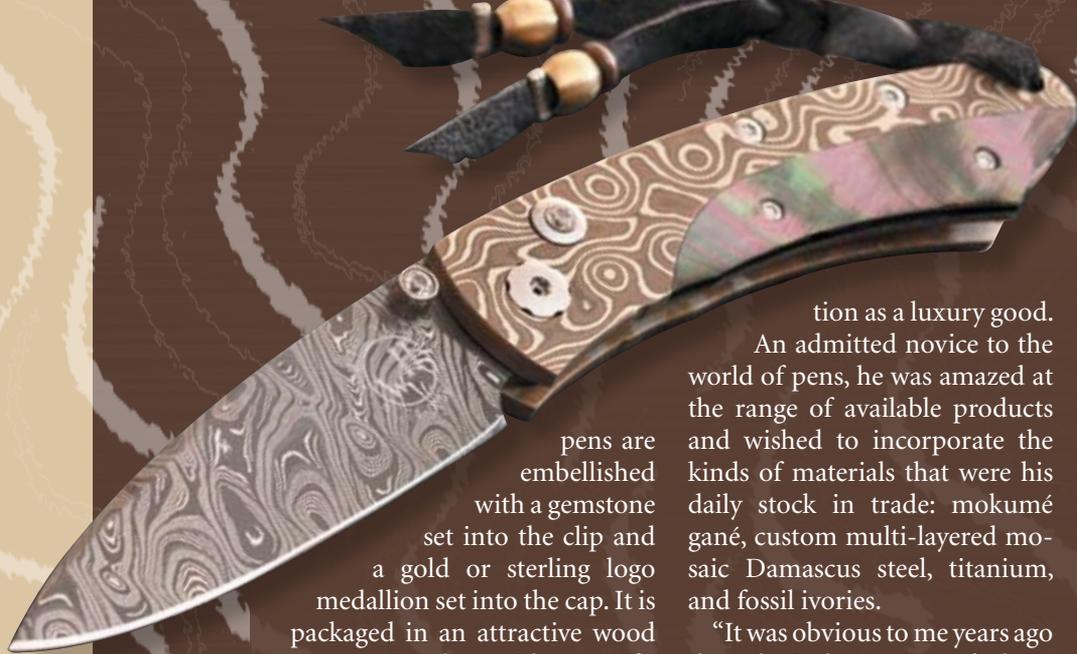
of the product. And then, once you make the product and realize you can make it better, your picture evolves...you continually evolve the vision and challenge yourself to do it better.” He points out that William Henry knives are also an investment. Ten years ago he made two 25-piece sets, and sold number eight in each set. These knives recently sold on eBay for approximately five times the original price.

New Developments

Conable noticed that their knives were featured in a growing number of very fine retail boutiques that didn’t carry pens, but that had customers walking in every day who were looking for something unique and special. And he knew the time was right to realize another of his dreams, the production of fine pens. “I didn’t want to make another cigar-shaped pen. I wanted something that stood out on its own, and I hoped that my naiveté when it came to pens, architecture and design might actually help in that we’d come up with something that’s more novel—not just based on materials, but based on conception.”

It took him seven months to get the materials together to make the initial run of 500 pens. Each distinctive pen will be released in a limited edition of just 100 pieces and will feature its number engraved on the end cap. The





pens are embellished with a gemstone set into the clip and a gold or sterling logo medallion set into the cap. It is packaged in an attractive wood presentation box with a certificate of authenticity.

Conable prepared for this project by studying both watches and pens to learn how to market the combination of form and func-

tion as a luxury good.

An admitted novice to the world of pens, he was amazed at the range of available products and wished to incorporate the kinds of materials that were his daily stock in trade: mokumé gané, custom multi-layered mosaic Damascus steel, titanium, and fossil ivories.

"It was obvious to me years ago that a logical extension of what I do would be pens. The question was if and when," Conable says. "About 16 months ago I finally decided that both of those questions were answered and that

I was crazy not to try this." He felt that the company had the latitude to expand beyond cutting tools, taking their accrued knowledge and applying it to this new realm. "I didn't have to bring out the world's greatest pen design, or revolutionize the mechanics of a pen. But I had to execute very well, because that's the standard that we hold."

Conable sums it up simply: "More than anything, we come from a tradition of craft excellence, and that's consistent in everything we do. The vision of this company was to build—and these are our exact words from ten years ago—"the finest tools possible." That was it, and that's never changed." 

"I hoped that my naiveté when it came to pens, architecture and design might actually help in that we'd come up with something that's more novel—not just based on materials, but based on conception."

The prestigious Blade Show and International Cutlery Fair in Atlanta gives out nine awards annually among 80 manufacturers worldwide. In ten years, William Henry has won 12 of those awards. They have won every year, some years in multiple categories.

